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SUBJECT: NETHERLANDS/EU PRESIDENCY: THE HALF-WAY POINT

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Classified By: Ambassador Clifford Sobel for reasons 1.4(B) and (D).

¶1. (C) Summary. With three months down and three to go, the Dutch no doubt view the first half of their presidency as a qualified success. They have made measurable progress on most of their priorities and effectively navigated two unexpected developments (the crisis in Darfur and PM Balkenende's illness). From the US standpoint, having the Dutch in the presidency is a good thing for the transatlantic partnership. However, the Dutch Chair's predisposition toward neutrality will continue to limit their willingness to be assertive on issues of concern to the U.S. The Dutch successfully pushed the EU to become more involved in Iraq and clearly share US objectives for US-EU cooperation in counter-terrorism and the transatlantic agenda. Dutch support for the recent Ridge and Ashcroft visits was key to their achieving concrete results. On issues such as the China and Libya arms embargoes or Iran, however, Dutch determination to play the role of "honest broker" means that we cannot count on them to stand in the way of a developing consensus that runs counter to U.S. or Dutch national positions. With several of the most important presidency events -- the EU-China summit, two EU Councils, U.S.-EU ministerial -- still to come, our experience suggests that the Dutch will continue to be most useful in providing insights into EU decision-making and in conveying accurately U.S. views in EU fora. On the economic front, the Dutch have made a priority of the EU's Lisbon agenda of reinvigorating the European economy, while remaining open to US ideas and suggestions -- hosting a major transatlantic conference on innovation in November, for example. End summary.

Working with the Dutch

¶2. (C) With three months of their EU presidency completed on October 1, the Dutch have reached a half-way point of sorts; as August is a "down month" for most of Europe, the EU calendar is heavily skewed toward the second half. So far, the Dutch presidency has largely lived up to expectations (reftel): well-organized, "realistic" ambitions (the Dutch use the word consistently), and stringently neutral. Certainly working with them is, in the main, easy: they are accessible, considering the demands of the presidency, and continue their tradition of transparency. (An exception has been their odd reluctance to permit US observers to have access to the informal Councils held in the Netherlands; they have willingly granted access only to the foreign ministers and agriculture ministers Councils.) They listen to US arguments. Especially when the US has been timely in its demarches (as in at least a week before a GAERC), they have expressed strong appreciation. Even the unexpected illness of Prime Minister Balkenende -- which reportedly will keep him out of commission until late October -- has been managed effectively, with Deputy PM Zalm or (as in the case of the ASEM and Korea Summits) Luxembourg PM Juncker stepping in to handle protocol functions while the Dutch MFA manages day-to-day affairs. Balkenende's illness and other events outside Dutch control have, however, complicated Dutch plans for a series of successful summits. While the Ukraine and S.Korean summits passed relatively uneventfully, the India summit was postponed and appeared in danger of slipping away from the Dutch, the planned Canada summit was postponed beyond the Dutch presidency, and the question of Burmese participation at ASEM attracted unwanted controversy for the Dutch. The two biggest third party summits -- Russia and China -- remain on the horizon, as well as the U.S.-EU ministerial and the two European Council summits.

¶3. (C) On a few issues, such as their high priority deregulation campaign and their equally high priority desire to introduce better analysis in the EU's budget process, the Dutch have exercised decisive leadership. They merit considerable praise for their role in moving the EU toward more cooperation on Iraq and in coordinating timely responses to developments in Sudan. Despite their somewhat compromised position as a member of the coalition, they have actively used their presidency to encourage an EU role in Iraq, partly through pushing a reportedly reluctant Commission to send its "exploratory missions" to Baghdad, and to develop specific project proposals for the EU. On Darfur they have kept the pressure on for a responsible EU role, though here they are pretty much in the mainstream of the member states and have stayed with the bounds of maximizing "effective

multilateralism," i.e., waiting for decisions in New York. On many issues, though, the Dutch are very attentive to their belief that the proper presidency role is to foster consensus while remaining "neutral" themselves. Thus even when the Dutch, as the Dutch, express sympathy for US positions, we cannot count on them to stand in the way of a developing consensus running in the other direction. China (where the Dutch are prepared, reluctantly, not to break a consensus in favor of lifting the arms embargo) and Iran (where the Dutch have made no effort to lead the EU toward supporting referral of the nuclear issue to the UNSC) are examples of this tendency. Dutch leadership was also ineffective in controlling the debate on lifting the arms embargo on Libya (although the Dutch made an effort to implement a partial lift, they did not break consensus when it became clear they stood alone) and the Palestinian push in New York to endorse the ICJ ruling on the Israeli Security Barrier. With regard to Burma/ASEM, the Dutch appear to have been critical both in working out the "compromise" allowing Burma to participate at a lower-level, and in pushing the EU to commit to imposing additional measures on Burma if it fails to live up to earlier human-rights commitments (which the EU did at the October 11 GAERC).

14. (C) Even on issues where the Dutch are uncomfortable diverging from a developing EU consensus, the Dutch have generally been transparent with us regarding developments within the EU and in highlighting areas of concern. We anticipate that this trend will continue. For the remainder of the EU presidency, we should expect the Dutch to inform us of what their own problems are in dealing with the member states. Though their activism clearly is constrained by their adherence to the principle of presidential neutrality, their sense of responsibility in the presidency means they will also continue to accurately communicate the US position in the Councils (at least in the corridors) and to ensure that that US views are taken into account when possible. The Dutch have been and will be a good channel for the US to assure that timely arguments achieve resonance in the Councils. This is, of course, especially true on those few issues that the Dutch appear ready to move off their neutral presidency stance (but we should not expect that there will be very many such instances).

Heavily loaded calendar for second half

15. (C) The Dutch agenda (deregulation and other aspects of progress on the Lisbon agenda, laying the foundation for the "right" EU budget decisions, accomplishing "successful" summits with China, India and the ASEM countries, etc.), plus the big EU events (two Councils at the summit level, with the second making the Turkish accession decision) -- just the most prominent among many meetings -- mean the Dutch will be very busy through December. They will want to have measurable progress on their economic priorities at the Councils, and a good (meaning defensible) decision on Turkey in order to judge their presidency a success. The US interest in Turkish accession to the EU has been well-served by the Dutch presidency thus far. The real test is yet to come, of course, but despite strong domestic sentiment against Turkish accession -- including divisions within the governing coalition -- the Dutch leadership seems to be ideally suited to facilitating a positive EU decision. The Dutch, we believe, are not just saying the goal posts should not be moved (i.e., that there is an implied contract between Turkey and the EU on what has to be done), but really believe it. We expect that they will work to see that the Council decision is made on that basis.

Transatlanticism

16. (C) The Dutch believe relations with the US are important and need improving, and without saying so, will include improved working relations with the US as a measure of their presidency's success. They have worked to use JHA contacts from the working level to the recent ministerial contacts to improve counter-terrorism cooperation. Dutch support for the recent Ridge and Ashcroft visits was a good demonstration of their ability to transform good intentions into concrete results. They are welcoming the Innovation Conference in November as not only a demonstration of transatlanticism, but a contribution to their Lisbon agenda goals as well. Iraq and Darfur are areas where they want an EU role complementary to US objectives. While perhaps the EU follow-up on some of the June Summit agreements (stakeholder consultations comes to mind) has not been as rapid as we might have liked, we remain confident that whenever we can point out an area of potential for improved US-EU cooperation, the Dutch will be ready to carry the ball.

Conclusion:

17. (C) On balance the Dutch presidency has worked to U.S.

advantage. The Dutch have successfully managed issues of concern to both sides, such as the budding EU role in Iraq, and have been ready to let the US succeed on others (such as the China Arms Embargo) as long as their presidency "neutrality" can be preserved. We would expect the Dutch to continue to communicate effectively U.S. positions and concerns to the best of their ability, and to work with us to avoid conflicts or misunderstandings. We should continue to take full advantage of the relative transparency of the Dutch presidency to push our agenda, while understanding that Dutch national sympathy for specific U.S. will remain constrained by the perceived obligations of their presidency role.

SOBEL